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SALT II debate mired in Soviet missile query

At issue: Can USSR deploy more missiles than the US?

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Debate over the new SALT treaty so far has consistently focused on four issues. Now yet another may be emerging to complicate life for the Carter administration:

This issue involves the Soviet Union's ability to deploy new land-based missiles. The new strategic arms treaty allows deployment of only one new type of light intercontinental ballistic missile.

But some critics of the treaty are beginning to say that, under the terms, there is enough leeway for the Soviets to deploy what would amount to three or four new ICBMs -- or a so-called new fifth generation of land-based missiles.

This question has not been addressed in the current Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearings on SALT, but it is expected to arise when the more technically oriented Armed Services Committee of the Senate begins its hearings next week. There also are indications that Gen. Alexander Haig, recently retired commander of NATO forces, may make an issue of this question. General Haig seems to be leaning against the SALT treaty.

The most detailed description of the critics' argument concerning new types of missiles appears in the magazine Aviation Week & Space Technology. In a recent issue, the magazine quoted an unnamed strategic weapons expert, who formerly served as a SALT negotiator, as saying: "Because of ... technological advances in engine pumping and avionics, the Soviets can go about their business of deploying new ICBMs under the rubric of ICBM modernization in the treaty."

The same expert is quoted further as saying that even though the treaty allows only a 5 percent increase in the parameters of new ICBMs, this is a "farce" because, according to this expert, the US Central Intelligence Agency has testified that it cannot verify the length, width, and throw-weight of missiles within 15 percent.

Administration officials and other defenders of the new treaty acknowledge that there is nothing in the treaty to prevent either side from achieving certain increases in the accuracy and payload of their missiles. But they also argue that the treaty provides for limits in an area of much greater importance -- namely limits on increases in the number of warheads allowed to each missile -- and that the treaty does, in fact, slow the development of ICBM technology.

In the meantime, the Foreign Relations Committee hearings entered their second week with neither critics nor defenders of the treaty appearing to gain a decisive edge. According to a number of experts, the administration is still far from obtaining the 67 Senate votes it needs to secure ratification of the treaty. But the number of undecided senators remains large enough that opponents are still far from certain they can obtain the 34 votes needed to defeat the treaty. Amendments to the treaty -- more likely than a move to defeat it outright -- will require a majority, or 51 votes.

Some of the action occurring outside the hearings may prove to be more important than the hearings themselves. Having met recently with Soviet President Leonid Brezhnev, the Senate majority leader, Robert Byrd (D) of West Virginia, appears to be placing himself in a position to formulate a set of understandings and resolutions that would clarify the Senate view of the treaty but would not alter it enough to result in rejection by the Soviets. At the proper moment, Senator Byrd could become a strong "point man" for the administration in the SALT debate.

Sen. Howard Baker (R) of Tennessee, one of the main critics of the new treaty, appears to have lost some of his effectiveness in the debate. In the view of a number of experts on SALT, Senator Baker did not display a grasp of a number of essential technical details in last week's Foreign Relations Committee hearings.

(United Press International reported from Washington July 17 that Adm. Isaac Kidd, former commander of America's nuclear missile submarines, and two other retired officers were the first military men to tell the Senate Foreign Relations Committee why the SALT II treaty is beneficial.

(Admiral Kidd told the panel he viewed SALT II as a breathing space during which the United States could catch up to the Soviets in strategic strength. "The treaty offers timeout, as it were, for us to catch up. I trust we will not blow this opportunity to catch up, as it could well be our last chance," he said.)